Alone by bananannabeth

Series: You Can Talk To Me (aka. Karen Wheeler is a Good Mom™) [3]
Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: Bob Newby/Joyce Byers, Eleven/Mike Wheeler - Freeform, Gen, Jim Hopper/Joyce Byers, Nancy Wheeler/Jonathan Byers - Freeform, also brief mention of Ted Wheeler and Lonnie Byers being shit, and passing the Bechdel Test, but i promise this whole fic is just Joyce and Karen being friends, mentions of a few relationships:, reminiscing about high school
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Summary:

Karen left Joyce alone when she so obviously needed support, and now she's trying to make amends. Casserole and coffee seems as good a place as any to start.

Alone

Author's Note:

> I recommend reading at least the first work in this series, You Found Me In The Rain, for context on how Karen found out about everything that's happened.
>
> But basically I was disappointed by the lack of female friendships in the show, and I think that Joyce and Karen have such great potential to support each other, so here's a rough, un-betaed take on how that might start.

Sometimes, when things got really hard, Karen felt like a single mother. When the teenagers were being bratty and Holly was still so dependant and Ted was just never there, or never there in the ways she needed him to be, Karen felt completely and utterly alone.

But then Joyce would ring, checking up on Will or letting him know Jonathan was on his way to collect him, and suddenly everything would be thrown into sharp relief.

Ted wasn’t there, but he was at work, earning a wage that was decent enough for them to afford their nice house and their nice food, enough that she never had to worry about buying the kids new clothes or new toys. So maybe he wasn’t there in all the ways that she needed him to be, but at least he was there in some ways, in the end.

No one was there for Joyce.

Karen had known this for a long time, of course. She'd known it from the moment Lonnie had deserted his family, when Mike had crawled into the car after a play date with Will, confused, and asked her what a divorce was.

But it seemed more apparent, now. Now that Karen knew everything that the Byers had been through.

She thought back to that lunch with Joyce, back to when Will was still missing, to the Christmas lights strung up all over the house and the panic in Joyce's eyes as she'd asked Holly if she'd seen something in the wall.

Karen should have seen it, then. She should have pushed Joyce to talk, should have stuck around instead of leaving her on her own when she clearly needed support. But she'd had Holly to worry about, and at the time getting her home safe had been her number one concern.

Holly wasn't here, this time. She was at preschool, and Mike and Nancy were at school, and so Karen was alone as she approached the Byers' house, a huge casserole dish balanced carefully in her arms.

Joyce clearly hadn't been expecting her. Her eyes went wide as she took in the casserole and she stumbled over her greeting, but she swung the door open and invited Karen inside anyway.

The house was clean, with no out of season Christmas lights and no drawings of tunnels covering the walls. Karen looked around, trying to picture the house as Mike and Nancy had described it; covered from floor to ceiling in a labyrinthine map, all hand drawn by Will and meticulously fit together by the others.

She couldn't imagine it. Everything just looked so… normal.

Joyce offered to put the casserole in the oven, and Karen was snapped out of her thoughts.

"Oh, no, you don't have to put it on now!" she said as she handed the dish over. "It's for you and the boys."

"Oh! Oh, well. Thank you, Karen." Joyce gingerly placed it in the fridge, and Karen glimpsed a stack of Eggos covered in whipped cream tucked on the top shelf. "That's very kind of you."

Her words were nothing but polite, but Karen had known Joyce long enough now to recognise the question beneath them; *What the hell are you doing here?*

"I'm sorry for just dropping in like this, without warning," she began.

Joyce blinked at her and sat down at the small table in the kitchen. "It's okay."

Karen gingerly sat down opposite her. “Joyce, I want to apologise. I shouldn’t have waited so long to come around. I’m sorry that I’ve been so terrible at keeping in contact -”

“We talk twice a week,” Joyce replied, voice stilted. She looked a little stunned.

“Yes, about the boys. Or about Jonathan and Nancy. It’s always about the kids - What they’re doing, where they’re going, who they’re with. We never talk just to talk to each other.”

Joyce exhaled. Her hand shook where it was resting on the top of the table. She laughed hoarsely. “There’s not much to talk about.”

Karen looked at her flatly.

“I mean…” Joyce waved a hand up by her head, gesturing vaguely. “There is, I just don’t know *how* to talk about it.”

One of Will’s drawings was in pride of place on the fridge door; *Bob Newby, Superhero* .

Karen worried her bottom lip between her teeth, feeling woefully unprepared.

She’d felt the same when Will was missing, and even more so when his body had been discovered at the quarry. But at least there’d been

some context for that, a vague thread of connection. Karen had felt worried for her son before, and she'd felt grief (although she couldn't even begin to imagine the pain of losing a child).

But this… she had no idea how to even begin when everything Joyce had been through was so far beyond her realm of experience.

"I'm sorry," she said again, because that seemed as good a place to start as any.

Joyce clasped her hands together and looked down at her knuckles. "Do you want some coffee? I'll put on some coffee."

Before Karen could even respond she was out of her chair, moving around the kitchen and making two cups of instant.

While her back was turned, Karen took the opportunity to look around at some of Will's other drawings that were on display. She recognised almost all of the faces in them; there was one of Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Will, dressed up as their characters from that game they liked to play, Dungeons and Dragons; there was another one of the group, but with two extra characters, whom she guessed from their hair were El and Max; and there was one that she found herself lingering on. Jonathan, Will and Joyce, all smiling, and beside them stood El, wearing a pink dress and beaming, and behind her, next to Joyce, was a figure in uniform.

Karen laughed, and Joyce spun around, sloshing some coffee over the brim of a cup. She quickly placed both cups on the table, swearing and wiping her hand on her pants. "What is it?"

“Sorry.” Karen handed her a tissue from the stash she kept in her pocket; one of the many joys of having a young child. “I just don’t think I’ve ever seen Hopper smile like that before.”

Joyce followed her gaze to the drawing, and her lips quirked up in a smile of her own. “It’s pretty good, isn’t it?”

“Will’s very talented.”

Joyce’s smile grew fonder, softer, and she slowly sat down. There was a pause before she said, “Hop used to smile a lot more, you know. Back in high school, he used to tell the dirtiest jokes…”

“No!” Karen gasped. “He always seemed so stoic.”

Joyce laughed at that. “He was just trying to be cool. You know, he had to look tough.”

“It always looked so effortless, though. You and him, you were always so cool.” Karen’s voice had taken on that low, nostalgic tone she often got after a few too many glasses of wine.

Joyce snorted. “Effortless? God, nothing about high school was effortless. And like you can talk, you were always so popular -”

It was Karen's turn to laugh, now. "Not in the way you were! God, you have no idea how much I wished I could get away with the stuff you did."

"What?" Joyce's eyes were huge over the rim of her cup. "I wished that I was half as smart as you. You always aced everything, every test… I used to get so frustrated, half the time I'd give up and go smoke behind the gym instead of going to class…"

Karen's smile dropped. "Do you think our kids do that?"

Joyce paused, obviously taken by surprise at the sudden change in the tone of the conversation.

"I mean, I'm not…" Karen started, then stopped, then started again. "I know they're not like us, not really -"

"Nancy's a lot like you," Joyce countered, raising her eyebrows. "So much like I remember you. So serious, so studious, so sweet."

Karen actually felt herself blushing a little. "You think?"

Joyce nodded and took a long sip of her coffee. "Yeah, I do. Sometimes I overhear her and Jonathan talking and it's… it's like I'm listening to you and… Oh, what was his name…?"

"Ken Jacobi," Karen muttered, suddenly very interested in a crack in

the table top.

“Ken Jacobi!” Joyce exclaimed, clicking her fingers. “Oh, my god, I haven’t thought about him in a long time.”

“Either have I.” Karen frowned as she thought back to her high school boyfriend. “God, I wonder what he’s doing these days. I heard he moved to Maine.”

Joyce winced, and when Karen looked up, her eyes were trained on the drawing of Bob on the fridge. She stared at it until her eyes grew wet, and then shook her head, clearing her throat and swiping her sleeve over her face. Her voice cracked as she asked, “Why’d you two break up, again?”

Karen laughed lowly. “I wanted something more serious than late night make out sessions and pissing off our parents.”

Joyce smiled crookedly. “Good choice.”

“Mhmm.” Karen thought of Ted, and how mature she’d felt when she’d been seventeen and an older guy had been interested in her. She took a swig of her coffee and ignored the bitterness. “But do you think our kids get to do all that normal teenage stuff we did?”

Joyce leant back in her chair, draping one arm over the back. “I think they do. The best bits, anyway… The school dances, the science fairs, the weekends with friends…”

Karen sat up straighter, wrapping both hands around her cup and sighing. “The dates.”

“Oh, we’re in trouble with that one.” Joyce smirked.

“I know, Nancy’s pretty smitten -”

“I wasn’t talking about Nancy and Jonathan,” Joyce said. “As cute as they are, they’re fine. They’re old enough and smart enough to know what they’re doing together.”

Karen regarded her closely. “You mean Mike and El?”

She nodded. “Now those two are trouble.”

Karen couldn’t help but scowl a little. “So you’ve seen it too, huh?”

“Oh, I think everyone who’s ever been in the same room as the two of them at the same time has seen it. They can’t keep their eyes off each other.”

“Or their hands! I swear, every time I look at them they’re holding hands or she’s got her head on his shoulder or he’s hugging her, it’s -” Karen stopped mid-rant, because Joyce was laughing again. “It’s not funny!”

“I’m sorry,” Joyce tried, but she was speaking through her laughter. “It’s a little funny.”

Karen cracked, lips breaking into an exasperated smile. “I never expected that I’d have to worry about *Mike* getting in trouble with a girl at fourteen…”

“Try twelve,” Joyce corrected.

Karen blanched. “Excuse me?”

“According to the boys, he’s been mad about El ever since they found her. Caused a bit of tension between him and Lucas, apparently.”

She thought back to the fort in the basement, and felt a little queasy all of a sudden. “Of course they left that bit out of the story.”

“You can’t really blame them, though,” Joyce said, softer now. “After being apart for so long.”

Karen nodded, closing her eyes. “That whole year, I had no idea what was going on… He just kept lashing out, and I didn’t know what to do, and it was because he was heartbroken, grieving…”

“Mike’s a tough kid,” Joyce said. She put her hand on top of the

table, close to Karen's but not quite touching. "And he's okay, now. They're all okay, now."

Karen took Joyce's hand in her own and squeezed, ignoring the tears she could feel falling down her cheeks.

They only let go of each other when the door banged open and two small figures came running inside, chased by Hopper bellowing, "What have we said about knocking, kid? You've gotta let people know you're coming!"

"Joyce, we're coming to visit!" El called, spinning in a circle until she was facing the kitchen. Her eyes fell on Karen and her expression shifted, but not to something unpleasant. She just looked surprised.

"Hi, El," Karen said warmly. "Hello, Will."

Will stood beside El, both hands clasped around the straps of his backpack, and looked between the two women at the table.

Hopper nodded to her as he stepped inside, gently closing the door behind him. "Karen."

"Hopper," she returned the nod.

Joyce got up and wrapped her arms around the two children, dropping a kiss on top of each of their heads. When she pulled back,

El immediately re-focused on Karen, who was standing, hovering, at the edge of the room. “Mike?”

Will immediately translated. “Is Mike here?”

Joyce flashed Karen a knowing look, and it took all of her willpower not to smirk. “No, he’s on his way home from school, I suppose.”

El’s and Will’s faces fell. “Oh.”

“But,” Joyce said, wringing her hands together. “Maybe, if Karen’s okay with it, you could call him on your SuperCom…”

Both kids lit up at the prospect, and how could she say no to those eyes.

“Tell him to come straight here, and then I’ll take him home with me when I have to pick up Holly.”

“Yes!” Will exclaimed, slinging his backpack off his shoulders as El simultaneously began unzipping it, reaching in for his walkie talkie.

Out of the corner of her eye, Karen spotted Hopper rest his hand on Joyce’s back, leaning down to murmur in her ear. Joyce murmured something back, smiling and - was she blushing?

Mike's voice crackled through the speaker of the walkie talkie, responding to Will's invitation. "Are you serious? This isn't a prank? Over."

"Not a prank," El said in her serious manner.

"Come on, dude, if you hurry we might have enough time to finish the next campaign! Over!" Will exclaimed.

"I'm on my way! Over!"

Will stuffed the SuperCom back into his bag, picking it up and running into his room. "Come on El, let's get the notes ready -"

El flashed a grin at the adults before racing after him.

Karen turned back around to look at Hopper and Joyce, and felt, strangely, like she was sixteen again, standing nervously beneath the school bleachers and looking at the kids who were so much cooler and knew so much more than her.

But then Joyce smiled and waved her back towards the table, where their coffee was going cold. "Hop, Karen made us a casserole."

Hopper raised his eyebrows. "You mean I don't have to eat your mashed potatoes tonight?"

Joyce lightly hit him on the chest. “Shut up, you! It’s better than those microwave dinners.”

Karen smiled, because it was very clear that Joyce Byers was far from alone. And when Joyce gave her an exasperated smile and Hopper smirked over her head, Karen thought maybe she wasn’t alone, either.